

Seventeen years ago today, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela gave the world something to think about. It certainly was not the first time he had done so, having spent 27 years in prison for his tireless crusade against the apartheid government that kept South Africa's black population stripped of rights, hope, and political representation. On February 11, 1990, he was released from what was originally intended to be a lifelong jail sentence, Mandela renewed without hesitation his pledge to achieve a peaceful, equitable, and free South Africa for all its people. His release and the accompanying reinstatement of his political party, the African National Congress, were a testament to the power bred when peaceful conviction for change at a local level meets worldwide support and concern.

Four years later, 20,000,000 citizens cast their ballots in the country's first election under universal suffrage, and Mandela won the Presidency by 62 percent of the vote. As we honor his efforts today on the anniversary of his inauguration, we celebrate not an isolated victory, but a complete story—one whose inspiring triumph can only be fully appreciated after recognizing the disheartening circumstances from which it sprung.

For 46 years, the National Party of South Africa wielded the policies and practices of apartheid to cement power for the white minority over the country's other ethnic groups. Blacks were deprived of their citizenship in 1970 and forced to relocate into segregated, self-governing residential "homelands" called Bantustans. Such homelands served to create ethnically homogenous territories that propagated slum-like living conditions, violence, and dead-end roads for the majority of the country's population.

With a name that is now synonymous with peace, justice, equality, and the most steadfast perseverance, Nelson Mandela reminds us that the downtrodden can, and must, overcome. Mandela's legacy will be one not only of tremendous sacrifice, but also of tremendous achievement, adversity, and tenacity. His example reminds us that it is not only through a diversity of representation, but a unity of heart that a nation can truly move forward.